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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that a positive school climate is an important factor in school effectiveness. This paper reviews the major determinants of school climate and also reports the findings of a survey of 246 teachers and 76 principals in rural public schools in central Tennessee concerning three school climate factors: motivation and morale; communications; and leadership. Principals were considerably more positive than teachers about the climates of their schools. Over half of the principals reported that the climate in their schools "almost always": (1) made them enthusiastic about their work; (2) instilled professional pride in themselves and other staff; (3) encouraged them to do their best; (4) showed that they cared about teachers, students, and parents; (5) enabled them to participate in decisionmaking; (6) fostered innovativeness and creativity; (7) allowed for open exchange of ideas; (8) enhanced staff worth and dignity; (9) illustrated a commitment to a democratic style of leadership; (10) contributed to feelings of respect and trust among teachers and students; (11) allowed for expression of concerns and problems resolution; and (12) encouraged their professional growth. While most teachers answered "almost always" or "sometimes" to these items, over 40% said that the climate in their schools "almost never" made them enthusiastic about their work or instilled professional pride in themselves or other staff. The questionnaire and tables of responses are included. (SV)

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A STUDY TO ASSESS SCHOOL CLIMATE WITHIN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF THE CENTRAL GEOGRAPHIC REGION OF TENNESSEE

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Introduction

An important component of an effective school is a positive climate. Climate is generally thought of as the atmosphere or environment within which teachers and administrators work. A positive school climate should result in better staff performance, higher morale, and increased support for the school.

An assessment of school climate is a primary step toward a better school. Teachers and principals are the major on-site participants in this process. It is important to determine the perceptions presently held by these two groups in order that the school climate may be measured. The data in this study will be beneficial to decision-makers in their efforts to continue school improvement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to assess the climate in public schools located in the central geographic area of Tennessee as perceived by teachers and principals.

Review of Selected Literature

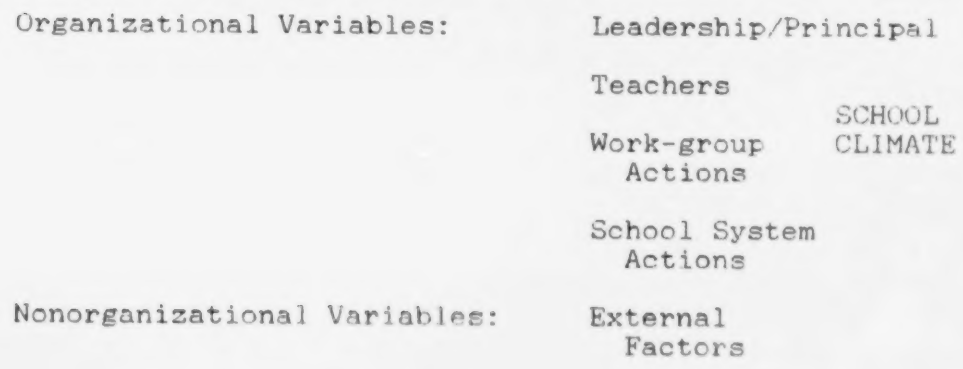
Contemporary research indicates that school climate is a vital factor in determining school success. School climate encompasses the total environment of the school,

including both internal and external influences. Within the school establishment, climate is a function of administrative practices, policy, personnel dispositions, and organizational structure. External influences include such things as community expectations, economic situations, special interest groups, and political conditions. The phenomenon of school climate impacts upon the level of organizational satisfaction and the capacity of personnel to accomplish their organizational responsibilities.

The major determinants of school climate are shown in Figure 1 which is an adaptation from The Principal Determinants of Organizational Climate presented by James M. Higgins in Human Relations: Concepts and Skills (Higgins, p. 204.)

Figure 1

DETERMINANTS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE



A positive school climate is essential if the school is to accomplish successfully intended goals. Researchers at the University of New England decided that school climate is the most common school level factor in determining school effectiveness. It was stated that school climate consists of three primary situations: an emphasis on academic achievement; an orderly environment; and consistent expectations for success. (Duignan, p. 63.)

Most would agree that an understanding of matters that influence school climate are useful when planning for and establishing school direction. Researchers at Johns-Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools concluded that school climate is central when assessing whether a school can achieve excellence in its programs and services. A school with high levels of disorder, low morale, and poor cooperation between teachers and administrators cannot be a good place to teach and learn. (Gottfredson and Hollifield, p. 63.)

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has shown considerable interest in the issue of public school climate. A NASSP task force on school climate noted that schools with positive climates were places where people respect and help each other; and are places where a feeling of caring and learning are projected. Also, there seems to be a high level of pride in effective schools which tends to foster a sense of ownership. (Keefe, et al., p.

70.) Therefore, a noticeable incidence of cooperation among school personnel plays an important part in establishing a desirable climate for teaching and learning.

The total organization must be involved in establishing a workable school climate. This includes school leadership, personnel, organizational groups, and external influences (See Figure 1). The school principal's behavior and actions affect the implementation of school policies and rules, give direction to school efforts, enhance communication, evaluate performance, motivate and reward, and provide for interaction between school and community. Individuals within the school environment bring unique personalities and human needs to the organization. The disposition and character of the organization affect the climate. The structure and organizational procedures impact the general satisfaction and performance levels of employes and students. It is important that leaders foster a meaningful congruence between organizational goals and individual needs. Also, community pressure groups and policy-makers should be considered when evaluating the composition of factors affecting school or organizational climate. (Higgins, pp. 206-209.)

Project RISE, a school improvement effort in Milwaukee, identified five essential elements of climate which affect school success. They are: (1) A clear school mission;

(2) High expectations for students and other school personnel; (3) A strong sense of school ownership; (4) A high level of collegiality among school personnel; and, (5) The recognition of personal and academic excellence. (Larkin and Kritek, p. 17.) This position gained the concurrence of Donna O'Neal who evaluates climate in relation to instructional leadership, expectations for student achievement, concern for school-wide objectives, classroom practices, monitoring school progress, and school and community partnerships. (O'Neal, 7-8.) All of these factors seem to be common to the literature concerning discernable characteristics of effective schools.

It is widely accepted that the school principal's leadership style and performance impact climate. If the school is to be productive and viable there must be a principal who gives consistent support and positive direction to the school. Jerry Valentine and Michael Bowman identified certain matters that contribute to the principal's efforts to maintain a beneficial climate for contemporary schools. These factors include building teacher and student relationships and strengthening interaction between the school and community. (Valentine and Bowman, pp. 18-25.) The principals who create and maintain productive school climates should rely on specific practices which involve high visibility; fair, well established disciplinary procedures; high expectations for

conduct and performance, innovative leadership techniques, provide opportunities for professional development; a system to resolve problems and conflicts; and, an interest in community involvement. (Nicholson, et al., p. 492.)

The intent of a positive school climate is to provide an environment where teachers can teach and students can learn. Although the principal is primary in enhancing climate, teachers, other staff, students, policy-makers, and community leaders have an important role in developing a safe, supportive learning climate. A universal commitment to developing good working relationships will do much to nuture the improvement of today's schools.

Studies at Arizona State University reinforce the importance of school climate. Climate prevades the entire composition of the school. M. Scott Norton found that:

1. Climate sets the tone for a school's approach for accomplishing goals and objectives.
2. Open communication engenders a climate of trust, respect, and positive human relations.
3. Climate helps to determine attitudes toward professional growth and orgainizational success.
4. Climate affects creativity and program improvement. (Norton, p. 43.)

A good school will have a good climate. The positive climate promotes enthusiastic performance, instills pride, denotes a concern for the wellbeing of all school personnel, enables teachers, and others to participate in the decision-making process, assures open channels of communication, and adheres to democratic principles. Teachers, principals, and

other leaders must work together to develop a climate that supports school effectiveness.

Presentation of Data

An instrument was developed and validated to assess school climate in a rural school environment. The elements comprising school climate are: motivation and morale, communication, and leadership. A total of 300 questionnaires were sent to teachers in the middle geographic area of Tennessee. Also, questionnaires were mailed to 100 school principals. Two hundred and forty-six teachers (82 percent) and 76 principals (76 percent) returned completed questionnaires. The results of the study are presented in the following 15 tables.

TABLE 1

ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT MY WORK

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	38	15	96	39	112	46	246	100
Principals	43	56	21	28	12	16	76	100
Chi Square	129.9748		Level of Significance				.0001	

TABLE 2

CLIMATE INSTILLS PRIDE

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	31	13	116	47	99	40	246	100
Principals	39	51	24	32	13	17	76	100
Chi Square	52.2075		Level of Significance		.0001			

TABLE 3

INTERESTED IN STUDENT'S WELFARE

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	49	20	121	49	76	31	246	100
Principals	37	49	28	37	11	14	76	100
Chi Square	25.6951		Level of Significance		.0001			

TABLE 4

ENCOURAGES ME TO DO MY BEST

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	41	17	173	70	32	13	246	100
Principals	42	54	28	39	6	08	76	100
Chi Square	45.2702		Level of Significance		.0001			

TABLE 5

PRINCIPAL CARES ABOUT TEACHERS

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	121	49	97	39	28	11	246	100
Principals	78	100	0	0	0	0	76	99
Chi Square	63.1216		Level of Significance		.0001			

TABLE 6

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	21	08	105	43	120	49	246	100
Principals	33	43	21	28	22	29	76	100

Chi Square 50.6731 Level of Significance .0001

TABLE 7

PARTICIPATE IN DECISION-MAKING

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	26	10	169	69	51	21	246	100
Principals	41	54	23	30	12	16	76	100

Chi Square 67.6175 Level of Significance .0001

TABLE 8

FOSTERS INNOVATIVENESS AND CREATIVITY

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	39	16	116	47	91	37	246	100
Principals	49	64	21	28	6	09	76	101
Chi Square	71.7420			Level of Significance			.0001	

TABLE 9

ALLOWS FOR OPEN EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	91	37	132	54	23	09	246	100
Principals	64	84	12	16	0	0	76	100
Chi Square	52.6180			Level of Significance			.0001	

TABLE 10

KEEPS TEACHER INFORMED

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	94	38	129	52	23	09	246	99
Principals	76	100	0	0	0	0	76	100

Chi Square 88.9465 Level of Significance .0001

TABLE 11

ENHANCES WORTH AND DIGNITY

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	88	36	121	49	37	15	246	100
Principals	53	70	21	28	2	03	76	101

Chi Square 28.7954 Level of Significance .0001

TABLE 12

DEMOCRATIC STYLE OF LEADERSHIP

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	89	36	103	42	54	22	246	100
Principals	61	80	13	17	2	03	76	100

Chi Square 46.5685 Level of Significance .0001

TABLE 13

FEELING OF RESPECT AND TRUST

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	84	34	119	48	43	17	246	99
Principals	73	96	3	04	0	0	76	100

Chi Square 89.1682 Level of Significance .0001

TABLE 14

ENVIRONMENT FOR EXPRESSION OF CONCERNS AND PROBLEMS

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	89	36	136	55	21	09	246	100
Principals	68	89	8	11	0	0	76	100

Chi Square 66.3209 Level of Significance .0001

TABLE 15

STRIVE TO GROW PROFESSIONALLY

RESPONDENTS	ALMOST ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		ALMOST NEVER		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers	61	25	126	51	59	24	246	100
Principals	66	87	10	13	0	0	76	100

Chi Square 94.8142 Level of Significance .0001

Summary of Findings

The findings are categorized in relation to the three components of school climate (motivation and morale, communication, and leadership) which were measured by the assessment inventory. (See Appendix A.)

Motivation and Morale

About half of the teachers reported "almost never" when asked if the school climate caused them to be enthusiastic about their work. Most principals indicated enthusiasm concerning their work. A majority of both groups stated that the school climate instilled professional pride. It was shown that the teachers and principals interpreted the school climate to be favorable for student welfare. The climate encouraged the groups to do their best, and showed that principals had created a caring environment.

Communication

The principals were positive in their views of parents as partners in the educational process. However, teachers were not so positive. Most teachers felt they were "sometimes" involved in decision-making. Conversely, a majority of the principals thought that the climate engendered participation in the decision-making process. Nearly 40 percent of the teacher group said that the climate "almost never" fostered innovativeness or creativity.

Sixty-four percent of the principals marked "almost always" to this item on the questionnaire. However, there was general agreement that the climate allowed for an open exchange of ideas. A majority of both groups postured that the school climate created an atmosphere that keeps teachers informed about school issues.

Leadership

The respondents thought that the climate was such that the worth and dignity of school personnel were enhanced. Some 80 percent of the principals reported that the climate exemplified the democratic process; whereas, 54 percent of the teachers indicated "almost never." It is interesting to note that both sets of respondents considered the climate conductive to feelings of respect and trust for teachers and students. The responses were similarly positive concerning the opportunity for the expression of concerns and problem resolution. Principals (87 percent) believed that the climate enhanced professional growth. The teachers in the study were somewhat less positive.

Recommendations

Excellent schools do not simply "happen." They are the product of assessment and planning for human and program betterment. Since climate pervades all aspects of the school environment, developing a positive school climate is

very important in overall school improvement. Concerted efforts should be made to formulate techniques for reaching this goal. Cooperation and careful planning by teachers, principals, and other decision-makers will lead to an improved school climate and a more effective and efficient school. When this occurs, the result will be an open atmosphere for learning and personal growth.

APPENDIX A

Assessment of School Climate Inventory

Place the number of your choice of response to the left of the item number. Use the following legend.

1. Almost Always
2. Sometimes
3. Almost Never

The school climate in my school:

1. Causes me to be enthusiastic about my work.
2. Instills professional pride in all who work here.
3. Helps students realize that teachers are interested in their welfare.
4. Encourages me to do my best.
5. Shows that the principal cares about teachers.
6. Considers parents as partners in the educational process.
7. Enables me to participate in the decision-making process.
8. Fosters innovativeness and creativity.
9. Allows for an open exchange of ideas.
10. Creates an atmosphere that keeps teachers informed about school matter.
11. Enhances the worth and dignity of school personnel.
12. Illustrates a commitment to the democratic style of leadership.
13. Contributes to a feeling of respect and trust for all teachers and students.
14. Provides an environment for the expression of concerns and problem resolution.
15. Causes me to strive to grow professionally.

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